



EFL TEACHING PRACTICES UNDER THE WASHBACK OF HIGH-STAKES TESTS: WHAT ASPECTS ARE AFFECTED?

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Abstract: Washback, or the effects of tests on learning and teaching, is one of the important test qualities (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). There have been a few empirical studies on the washback of different tests on different stakeholders and their actions under the test use such as those by Brown (1997), Cheng (1997), McKinley & Thompson (2018), Nguyen (2017), Pizarro (2010), Shih (2009), Xu & Liu (2018), to name but a few. The results of such studies have shown that the washback of different tests varies in terms of mechanism, direction, and intensity of teaching and learning. This study explores the washback of the high-stakes English tests in the Vietnamese National High School Graduation Exam on the teaching of EFL high school teachers. Six teachers, who were teaching English to students at grade 12 in the research site of Buon Ma Thuot City (Dak Lak Province, Vietnam) were purposefully selected for the study. As a case study, the research employed was a two-phase explanatory design with the use of a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The findings reveal that various aspects of teaching, such as the teachers' choices of textbook coverage, time allotment for teaching content, provision of extracurricular content, in-class assessment tasks, their choices of teaching methods, application of new teaching techniques, choices of classroom organization and language for instructions were affected by the high—stakes English tests. In addition, the study discloses the unique teacher factors of the participants under the influence of the tests.

Keywords: washback, washback factors, teacher factor, washback mechanism.

1. Introduction

In exam-driven educational contexts like Vietnam, high-stakes tests and their results have been used for making important decisions towards learners, and to a certain extent, towards other stakeholders in educational settings as teachers, test developers, school administrators, material writers, and parents (Bailey, 1996; Hughes, 1993). Once a test is high-stakes, it is more likely to generate washback to different stakeholders than low-stakes ones (Alderson & Wall,

1993). In the language teaching contexts, there have mostly been more washback research studies on teachers and their teaching than on students and other stakeholders (Cheng et al., 2015; Green, 2007; Messick, 1996; Shih, 2009). What may be accountable for that is teachers have a key and active role in the education process and their teaching directly influences the learning of their students (Bailey, 1996). In Vietnam, there have been several studies on achievement EFL tests on both teachers and learners such as VSTEP (Nguyen, 2017), and TOEIC Listening and Reading as university tests (Nguyen & Gu, 2020). However, few have focused on investigating the washback of the English tests in the National High School Graduation Exam (NHSGE)

The study was therefore conducted to gain more insights into EFL teaching practices at Vietnamese high schools under the influences of the NHSGE English tests. Two main aspects of EFL teaching, including “*what* and *how* teachers teach” in the centralized educational context of Vietnam would be explored. Before that, specific teacher factors of the participants in the study were explored to provide justifications for the teachers’ actual practice of teaching. More specifically, the study aims to address the following two research questions:

- (1) What are the teacher factors contributing to the washback effects of the NHSGE English tests?
- (2) What aspects of teaching are influenced by the NHSGE English tests?

The results of the study are hoped to contribute to the literature on washback in general and washback of EFL tests in Vietnamese education contexts in particular. In addition, the study is an effort to raise awareness of all the stakeholders on the influences of high-stakes tests so that measures are taken to promote the positive washback and minimize negative washback of tests in a test-driven education system like Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

2.1. EFL teaching

EFL teaching is the abbreviation of English as a Foreign Language teaching, which is defined in Cambridge and Collin dictionary as the teaching of English to students whose first language is not English. In Vietnamese educational context, EFL is a current practice while ESL teaching, i.e., English as a second language teaching is popular in such countries as Singapore.

Popular EFL teaching methods, approaches and aspects of EFL teaching

Teaching different subjects may require a distinctive methodology to suit the characteristics of those subjects. Teaching EFL is not an exception. There have been various discussions on methodologies and approaches in teaching English as a foreign language. Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011) summarized ten popular language teaching methods and approaches, including (1) the Grammar- Translation Method, (2) the Direct Method, (3) the Audio-Lingual method, (4) the Silent way, (5) Desuggestopedia, (6) Community language learning, (7) Total physical response, (8) Communicative language teaching, (9) Content-based instruction and (10) Task-based language teaching. Each method with its techniques and activities is believed to serve different teaching goals and emphasize different language areas. Based on goals and emphasized language areas, there will be specific characteristics of teaching-learning process, teacher-learner interaction, and achievement evaluation, to name but a few. Among the methods suggested above, when teachers' goals are learners' mastery of discrete points like vocabulary and grammatical rules, they may employ such methods as the Grammar-Translation Method, and Direct Method (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011; Richard, 2006;). As explained in Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), the Grammar-Translation Method pays attention to teaching grammar and vocabulary deductively through translation texts into native language, whereas Direct Method advocates direct exposures to the target language through teacher-student oral exchanges in intensive classes to build up oral communication. On the other hand, the Audio-lingual Method focuses on presenting, drilling, and memorizing language chunks. Based on memorizing, practicing and speaking with drilling, this method enables learners to understand a language. When the goals of teaching go beyond discrete language points, the Communicative Language teaching (CLT) has been widely used in various educational contexts. There are several reasons for teachers' advocacy of Communicative language teaching in EFL and ESL (English as a second language) teaching. As shown in Sreehari (2012), CLT focuses on both learning product and process, and encourages more (both teacher-student and student- student) interaction in the target language. The use of authentic texts and creation of links between learning inside and outside the classroom are also the salient features of CLT. In summary, as convincingly argued in Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), there is no single best method. Instead, teachers should choose what reflects their own beliefs about the teaching-learning process, which may originate from their experiences and their professional training.

2.2. Teaching aspects

Alderson and Wall (1993) discussed teaching in terms of rate and sequence of teaching, and the degree and depth of teaching and attitudes to the content, method, etc. of teaching. In his description of "process" actions of teachers under the test influences, Hughes (1994) broke down teaching into content (curriculum and teaching materials), methodology and classroom

assessment. Hsu (2009) suggested teaching practices including “what teachers do in the classroom” (p.88), or to be more specific, teachers’ instruction medium, teaching activities, teaching materials, lesson planning, and teacher talk. From other empirical studies, teaching aspects may include the use of curriculum, materials, teaching methods, and teaching feelings and attitudes (Dinh, 2020; Nguyen & Gu, 2017; Pizarro, 2010). In her conceptual framework for washback on teaching, Shih (2009) suggested eight aspects of teaching, including:

- 1) *Content of teaching*
- 2) *Teaching method*
- 3) *Teacher-made assessment*
- 4) *Teacher talk*
- 5) *Time allotment for test preparation*
- 6) *Teacher assigned homework*
- 7) *Nervousness and anxiety*
- 8) *Atmosphere of the class*

As seen from the list above, Shih’s (2009) description of teaching aspects includes what teachers teach (teaching content), how teachers teach (teaching methodology, teacher talk) as suggested by Alderson and Wall (1993) together with test and assessment related activities, including assessment prepared by the teachers and the time they spend on preparing students for tests. Besides, class atmosphere and teachers’ and students’ anxiety are also included as aspects of teaching.

In light of previous studies and the EFL teaching context in Vietnam, EFL teaching will be discussed in terms of four sub-aspects of ‘*what teachers teach*’ and the other four sub-aspects of ‘*how teachers teach*’. More concretely, teachers’ teaching practices regarding teaching content selections, the decision on time allotment for selected teaching content, provision of extra materials and in-class assessment (what) and their choices of teaching methodology, application of new teaching ideas and techniques, the decision on classroom arrangement and preferences of language for instructions (how) were explored.

2.3. Washback to teaching

The term “washback” or “washback effects” have been used interchangeably with *backwash*, *impact*, and *consequential validity* in empirical washback studies by such researchers as Brown (1997), Cheng (1997), McKinley and Thompson (2018), Nguyen (2017), Pizarro (2010), and Xu & Liu (2018). Shohamy et al. (1996) generalized *washback* as the connection between testing and learning. In Bailey (1999), the term is further divided into “washback to the learners”, which refers to the effects of the tests on students and “washback to the program”, which means the effects of tests on teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and

counselors. The concept was defined as *the influence of testing on teaching and learning* by Cheng (1997, p.39) and further elaborated by McKinley and Thompson (2018) as *the influence that language testing has on curriculum design, teaching practices and learning behaviors*. In this current study, the definition of washback as *the influences, either positive or negative, of tests on different aspects of teaching and learning* in a micro scale which is limited to only classroom scale is used as the working definition.

Test washback is generated with the involvement of different factors. Empirical studies recognized several main factors including those relating to micro and macro contexts, tests, teachers, students, and other stakeholders such as test writers, researchers, etc. While contextual and test factors are quite objective and shared among people in the same educational contexts, factors relating to participants are inherently subjective. Among those, teacher factors have received attention from washback researchers since as owners of the teaching process, individual teachers possess distinctive features that should not be generalized or applied across research settings.

Firstly, one of the components embraced in the list of teacher factors is teachers' perceptions, which are taken as beliefs, feelings, and attitudes towards tests (Onaiba, 2013) or beliefs about teaching and testing (Green, 2013). As suggested in Green (2013, teachers' beliefs about teaching include their beliefs about effective teaching strategies and their alignment with test requirements and test preparation while those about testing concerns the beliefs about teachers' familiarity with the test, test use and stake. Dinh (2020), after reviewing studies on teachers' perceptions of teaching under the influences of tests, summarized teachers' perceptions as how teachers feel, think about, believe, and understand test objectives, format, and classroom teaching practices. Teachers' perceptions are believed to be generated by other teacher factors and contextual factors (Cheng, 2002; Le, 2011; Richard & Lockhard, 2007) and teachers may have distinctive perceptions under influences of different tests (Cholis & Rizqi, 2018; Liauh, 2011; Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen and Gu, 2020; Wall, 2005;). For example, considering TOEFL, Wall (2005) identified teachers' perceptions of the difficulty level of test tasks and awareness of the similarities between textbook test tasks and actual TOEFL test tasks. Their opinions of the difficulty level of the TOEFL to their students originated from whether they had taken the test themselves or their familiarity with the test and language proficiency. From these results, it can be inferred that language proficiency or abilities in the language that a teacher teaches and their familiarity with the test are components of teacher factors that affect teaching.

In addition, teachers' perceived importance of the test to the student (Shih, 2009) has considerable effects on teaching practices. Cholis and Rizqi (2018) found that the high-stakes Entrance Exam of University (EEU) positively affected Indonesian teachers' teaching activities.

The teachers conducted extra work under the influence of the test, spent more time preparing lessons, and revising materials for the test. This factor also relates to those that specify teachers' beliefs of effective teaching strategies, the compatibility between the test requirements, the need for test preparation and existing prior test preparation practices (Green, 2013).

Additionally, teaching experience is also believed to be one key teacher factor generating washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 1999; Hughes, 2003; Onaiba, 2013; Shohamy, 1993). Teachers' experiences not only refer to their years of teaching but also such factors as gender and frequency of additional training (Cheng, 2002). In those previous studies, it was shared that experienced teachers were believed to perceive test aspects and teaching differently from novice ones. More experienced teachers were also found to be less inclined to teach the test than less experienced ones.

In the Vietnamese EFL teaching context, Nguyen (2017) recognized the teachers' beliefs in the benefits of using the materials and content of VSTEP to help students deal with various test types. However, in the context of Taiwanese education, Liauh (2011) reported that the Taiwanese teachers believed that extra teaching materials should be provided to prepare students for the high stakes Exit English Examination. Differences in teacher factors, therefore, may generate different washbacks of the same test.

2.4. Proposed conceptual framework for the study

The framework suggested for this study takes roots from the critical review of the washback models and mechanisms by Alderson and Wall (1993), Bailey (1996), Batchman and Palmer (1996), Hughes (1993), and Shih (2009) which are summarized in Appendix 1. It is then formulated with careful considerations of the NHSGE English tests and the EFL context in Vietnam (Figure 1).

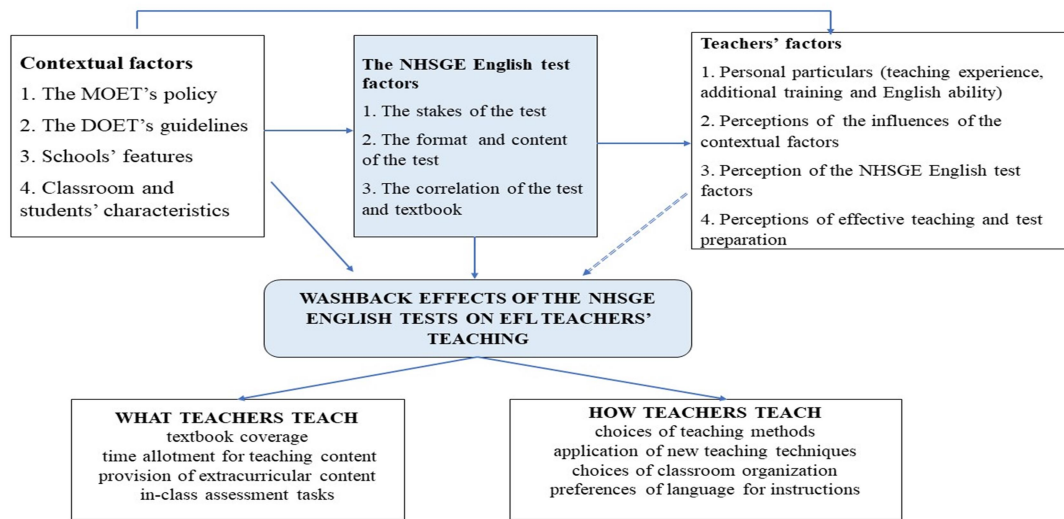


Figure 1. The conceptual framework for washback effects of the NHSGE English tests on EFL high school teachers

As seen in Figure 1, there are three factor groups, i.e. the contextual factors, the NHSGE English test factors, and the teacher factors. The contextual factors as washback triggers used in this study are described in terms of macro to micro contexts, including the policies of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education of Training (MOET) policies, the guidelines and instruction of the provincial department of education and training (DOET) on the NHSGE English tests and EFL teaching, the features of the schools and class-level factors. The NHSGE English test factors are described in terms of stakes, format and content, and their correlation with the textbooks. Finally, teacher factors are explored in terms of teachers’ personal particulars, their perceptions of the contextual factors, test factors and effective teaching and test preparation. The three factor groups are proposed to interact with one another to exert washback to teaching as depicted in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

A mixed method with a two-phase explanatory design was used for the study. To obtain thick and in-depth data within a bounded and real-life context (Cohen et al., 2007; Harrison et al., 2011; Yin, 2009) which suits the contemporary nature of washback, a case study with the participants of six EFL high school teachers was employed. The six participants, who were named Teacher 1 to 6 for the sake of information confidentiality, were teaching English to students of grade 12 at six high schools (which were called School 1 to 6 respectively) in the

selected research site, i.e., Buon Ma Thuot City (Dak Lak province, Vietnam). Information about the participants can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The participants' information

<i>Information</i>	<i>Teachers participating in the study</i>					
	<i>Teacher 1</i>	<i>Teacher 2</i>	<i>Teacher 3</i>	<i>Teacher 4</i>	<i>Teacher 5</i>	<i>Teacher 6</i>
Age range	22 - 30	31 - 40	31 - 40	31 - 40	40+	40+
Gender	male	female	female	male	male	female
Types of school	Public	Private	Private	Public	Public	Private
English proficiency level	C1	C1	C1	C1	C1	C1
Highest degree	B.A.	B.A.	B.A.	M.A.	B.A.	M.A.
Years of teaching EFL	5- 10 years	More than 10 years	5- 10 years	5- 10 years	More than 10 years	More than 10 years
Years of teaching EFL to 12 graders	Up to 5 years	Up to 5 years	Up to 5 years	5-10 years	5 - 10 years	More than 10 years
Being trained to be an EFL teacher	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The research instruments used in the study include a questionnaire (to collect data for the first research question on teacher factors) and a follow-up interview (to answer research question 2). The questionnaire consists of 27 questions divided into four main themes relating to the teacher factors and two themes on their teaching practices. The data from the last two themes functioned as preliminary input for the follow-up interviews. The themes of the questionnaire and follow-up interviews can be found in Appendix 2. Thematic analysis was then applied to interpret and discuss the data. A summary of the research design for this study can be found in Figure 2 below.

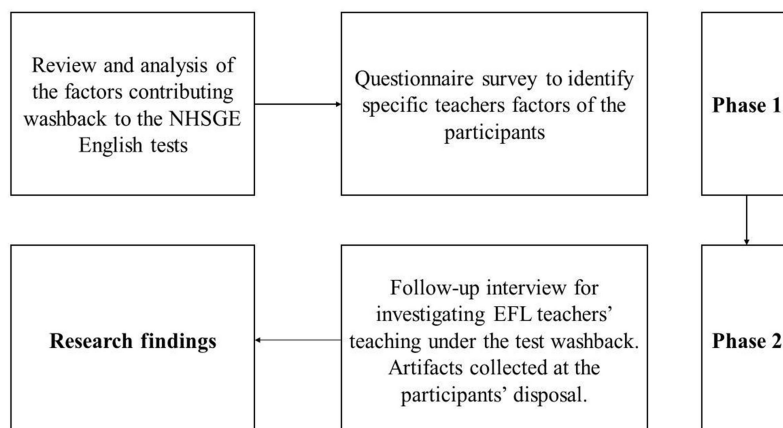


Figure 2. The research design employed for this study

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. *The teacher factors of the study participants*

As presented in the conceptual framework (Figure 1), four teacher factors are important in generating washback, including the EFL teachers' personal particulars (teaching experience, additional training, and English ability), perceptions of the influences of the contextual factors, perception of the NHSGE English test factors, and perceptions of effective teaching and test preparation.

Data obtained from questions 1 to 25 in the questionnaire (Appendix 3) showed that the six teachers shared the features of English ability, with all of them getting C1 proficiency level. They, however, varied in terms of experiences in teaching English to 12th graders, ranging from up to five years to more than 10 years. Three of them were working for public schools in the research site whereas the rest were working for private schools. In the last three years, they have received several additional training courses on EFL teaching methodology such as *how to apply technology in teaching*, and *how to use English textbooks effectively*.

It was also found that six teachers had good perceptions of the contextual factors, including the MOET's and DOET's policies, guidelines, and instructions relating to the NHSGE English tests and EFL teaching. They were also aware of the content of the schools' instructions on what and how to teach and test students, including *what units or parts in the textbook to teach in class*, *number of periods or hours allotted for each unit and part in the textbook*, *what in the textbook to be assigned as homework*, and *number of in-class assessment activities*. Additionally, the teachers

perceived the schools' evaluation of their annual performance was based on their students' performance in the NHSGE English tests. Concerning the students' attitude toward learning English, all six teachers reported that their students were interested in learning English. They also gave their evaluation, though subjective, of their students' English ability, stating that the latter was better at reading, vocabulary, and grammar than writing, speaking, and listening.

Regarding their perceptions of the NHGSE English test factors, it can be inferred from the data gained that the teachers comprehended the test format and content well. They knew the number of items, knowledge and skills tested and recognized the correlation, or more specifically the mismatch, between the test tasks and those in the textbooks.

The teachers consequently shared the same viewpoints on what effective teaching meant to them. It was found that helping students do well in the NHSGE English was considered a signpost of effective teaching by the teachers. They also took test preparation as a duty that they needed to fulfill as EFL teachers.

All in all, the participants in the study shared quite several factors, which may steer their teaching practices under the influence of the NHSGE English tests.

4.2. The washback of the NHSGE English tests on "what teachers teach"

The responses to the questionnaire and the interviews revealed the negative washback of the NHSGE English tests on what the six teachers taught in terms of content teaching, including textbook coverage, time allotment for teaching content, provision of extracurricular content and in-class assessment tasks.

Firstly, regarding the teachers' choices of textbook content coverage, when asked to briefly express their extent of agreement with the four statements (26.1 to 26.4), 5 out of 6 teachers in the study reported their adherence to the instructions by the schools. In the follow-up interviews, the concrete content in the prescribed program distribution plan that was excluded included *Speaking, Listening, Communication & Culture, and Looking back and Project*, all of which do not appear in the NHSGE tests. Below are some extracts from the interviews (Appendix 4-Interview transcripts).

... The school's program distribution plan has all the parts of all the units in the textbook but such parts as Culture, Project, Speaking, Listening are assigned as homework for students' self-study ... (Teacher 1, Appendix 4.1.)

... The parts on Listening, Speaking and Project are not being taught in class but reserved for self-study (Teacher 2, Appendix 4.2)

The findings, hence, disclosed the washback effects of the NHSGE English tests firstly on the school authorities in the way that they required the compulsory teaching content to inherently focus on the skills and knowledge tested in the test. Hence, the teachers focused on teaching only grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and reading skills that imitated the skills, and knowledge in the NHSGE English tests. This practice of narrowing the teaching content to only tested content under the teachers' perception of contextual factors (school factors in this case) and test factors is clear evidence of negative washback. The results also echoed the negative washback direction found in the previous studies by Asma (2014), Barnes (2017), and Herman and Golan (1991) to name but a few.

Secondly, in terms of time allotment for teaching content, the teachers showed more reluctance in obeying the prescribed time for specific teaching content. In response to statement 26.2. *"I stick to the time allotment for each teaching content in the program distribution plan for English"*, half of the teachers in the study expressed their compliance with the prescribed teaching time. Nonetheless, the follow-up interviews revealed that all six teachers adjusted teaching time for specific content. They were either cutting some parts shorter or giving more time than being prescribed for some other parts.

... Although grammar and reading sections are allocated 1 period for teaching in class, I found these two parts long so I would spend 1.5 to 2 periods for teaching these parts... (Teacher 4, Appendix 4.4)

... The parts on grammar, reading or writing across different units may be difficult or easy for students. When I saw that my students couldn't do a certain part, I would spend more time on it by explaining more or giving further practice and less on other parts... (Teacher 1, Appendix 4.1)

... I spent more time on the parts that my students were struggling with or those that are too long... (Teacher 3, Appendix 4.3)

... It is hard to follow the time allotment in the program distribution plan. In the plan, a section is normally given 1 period or 2 periods, but in reality, it is not possible to teach exactly like that. For the parts that students can do easily, I spend less time than being allotted and vice versa... (Teacher 2, Appendix 4.2)

As seen in the extracts above, the teachers decided the time for content, mainly grammar and reading comprehension, based on its length and difficulty levels. Besides, since they were focusing on teaching what was going to be tested in the NHSGE English tests as described in the previous part, the students' speed of dealing with certain content also affected their time allotment decision. These findings showed an interaction among the washback factors as described in the proposed washback models for the study. In other words, the test and its test

factors would interact with the contextual factors and teacher factors to exert influences on the teaching of teachers. The mechanism may be not identical depending on tests and stakeholders as proposed by Bailey (1996), Hughes (1993), and Shih (2009) but the washback factor interaction is evident. These findings confirmed the teachers' perceptions of the test stakes and their duties in preparing the students for this important test.

Thirdly, it was found that the teachers' provision of extra-curricular content was negatively affected by the NHSGE English tests. 100% of the teachers in the study agreed with statement 26.3 *"I provide additional materials that resemble the NHSGE English test tasks."* In the interviews, the teachers confirmed their responses to the questionnaire and gave more information on the format and content of additional materials. As specified in the interview extracts below, the additional materials provided by the teachers were mainly multiple-choice exercises, mock tests, and practice tests.

... I often use English tests in the previous NHSGE exams for students to do in class or at home. I also give exercises other than those in the textbooks for them to do... (Teacher 1, Appendix 4.1)

... I often provide my students with multiple-choice exercises, just like the tasks in the NHSGE English tests... (Teacher 2, Appendix 4.2)

... Normally I must provide more practice tests to my students... (Teacher 3, Appendix 4.3)

The sources of the materials were reported to be taken from online resources, which are "easy to find" (Teacher 5, Appendix 4.5) on the website of the MOET and various English teaching websites for the sake of saving teachers time (Teacher 2, Appendix 4.2). Rarer were the cases of Teachers 4 and 6 (Interviews 4.4 and 4.6) who, apart from using available resources, sometimes created short exercises that they believed would be appropriate to the level of their own students. Below are the sample exercises provided by Teacher 4 to illustrate the format and content of additional materials.

School: 4

Class: 12

Name:

PRACTICE NO. 1

Choose the correct answer to each of the following questions from 1 to 5.

Câu 1: He _____ his life to help the poor.

A. spent B. experienced C. used D. dedicated

Câu 2: The International Committee of the Red Cross is a private _____ institution founded in 1863 in Geneva, Switzerland.

A. humanity B. humanization C. human D. humanitarian

- Câu 3: How are you _____ on with your work? - It is OK.
 A. looking B. calling C. laying D. getting
- Câu 4: I am tired because I went to bed late last night.
 A. stayed up B. kept off C. brought up D. put out
- Câu 5: Boy! _____ away all your toys and go to bed right now.
 A. Put B. Lie C. Come D. Sit

It is evident that the additional material was in the format of a mini practice test, which is a multiple-choice test that examines students' grammatical knowledge. Although the other teachers did not offer their sample additional materials, their choices of additional material provision as an aspect of what to teach was very much NHSGE English tests oriented. This also illustrates the negative direction of the NHSGE English test washback. Empirical studies by Herman and Golan (1991) also found that teachers ignored the prescribed curriculum and adapted their teaching materials to the requirements of the English test in the Spanish university Entrance Exam. In Barnes (2017), teachers did not need to follow a rigid curriculum, but negative washback was reflected in their choice of textbooks that resembled the TOEFL iBT tests and focused on teaching "test task like" parts in the textbooks. Negative washback effects of high-stakes tests on choices of providing extracurricular materials were, therefore, not unique to the NHSGE English tests. The strong washback intensity was nevertheless evident.

Lastly, concerning the teachers' choices of in-class assessment tasks, all the teachers confirmed their designing in-class assessment tasks based entirely on the format and content of the NHSGE English tests as assumed in Statement 26.4. As justified in the interviews, format and content, most in-class assessment tasks are written multiple-choice tests and last for fewer than 15 minutes. The interview extracts below can illustrate the teachers' practice.

... I asked students to do up to 6 to 7 in-class assignments depending on their speed of learning ... (Teacher 2, Appendix 4.2)

.... I often give students mini multiple-choice tests on grammar, vocabulary and writing so that students get more practice and become familiar with the (NHSGE English) tests; probably 6 to 7 mini tests and record 3 highest marks/ score from those tests for them... (Teacher 3, Appendix 4.3)

These findings clearly depict the negative washback direction of the NHSGE English test although positive washback on assessment has been found in such studies as those by Sukyadi and Mariani (2011), Nguyen (2017) in Indonesia and Vietnamese educational contexts.

In summary, all four aspects of "what to teach" were affected negatively by the NHSGE English tests. The teachers followed the schools' prescribed program distribution plan which

had been narrowed to only tested knowledge and skills in the tests. Time allocation for teaching content was framed into teaching those test-oriented knowledge and skills but consideration to the contextual factors (student factors), which mitigated the negativity of washback to a certain extent. The teachers in the study also molded their choices of extra-curricular materials and in-class assessment tasks into those that serve NHSGE English test preparation, which was an indicator of strong washback intensity.

4.3. *The washback of the NHSGE English tests on “how teachers teach”*

Findings on “how teachers teach” are discussed in terms of the teachers’ choices of teaching methods, application of new teaching techniques, choices of classroom organization, and preferences of language for instructions.

Regarding the teaching methods that the teachers were using to teach EFL to 12th graders, 100% of the teachers agreed that they used the teaching methods that were suitable to the teaching content (Statement 27.1). When asked to elaborate on the methods that they were using in the follow-up interviews, the teachers gave quite interesting responses. Some answers extracted from the interviews are as follows:

... I don't apply any special method but focus on revising the knowledge for grade 12 students... (Teacher 2, Appendix 4.2)

... I have been trying to make my students interested in learning. Because (the teaching content for) Grade 12 mainly focuses on consolidating to help students master the knowledge on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation for the test, I often ask my students to present the reviewed knowledge in groups. The students work more in my class- I just do the wrap-up, give them exercises and correct their answers ... (Teacher 3, Appendix 4.3)

... I used mainly Grammar Translation methods, giving grammatical points for the students to revise. Grade 12 students focus on consolidating knowledge for the tests... Sometimes I ask my students to work in groups and write information on a small board. ... (Teacher 4, Appendix 4.4)

As seen in the extracts above, most teachers in the study did not name the methods they were using but explained the ways they conducted teaching activities. With the content to teach in the prescribed program distribution plan, the teachers concentrated on giving students tasks to do in groups and pairs either in class or at home, making them present and consolidate specific knowledge by themselves rather than deliver lessons in a formal teaching process. The teachers’ descriptions, hence, did not fully reflect the features of certain teaching methods, but it can be concluded that the teachers were not using communicative methods. Together with their perceptions of the stakes, these choices were understandable since the teaching contents consist

of vocabulary, grammatical structures and reading comprehension that normally call for the use of the Grammar Translation Method and Direct Method. In other educational settings, the high-stakes tests were found to limit teachers' teaching process to only giving instructions and asking for individual responses (Barnes, 2017) and ignorance of communicative teaching methods (Liauh, 2011; Sukiadi & Mardiani, 2011).

With such ignorance of teaching methods, 6 out of 6 teachers interestingly confirmed that they applied new teaching ideas and techniques that they have been trained in workshops into their teaching in Statement 27.2. It is worth noting that teachers in Vietnam, including EFL teachers, are given professional training courses by the MOET and DOET normally during summer. In the follow-up interviews, the six teachers in the study described their application of various tools and ideas acquired from additional training courses into their teaching. In accordance with their responses to Question 9 concerning the types of training courses they attended in the last three years in the questionnaire, they specified the ideas and tools in the interviews. Some extracts below illustrate their ideas.

... I was trained on how to use Google Classroom for teaching online since the Covid-19 pandemic. I find it effective... (Teacher 5, Appendix 4.5)

... I like using Padlet for students presenting projects. I was trained to use Google form for making mini tests... (Teacher 6, Appendix 4.6)

Their favorite tools and techniques were claimed in the interviews to be Google Classroom, Quizlet, Padlet, Flipgrid and games for reviewing vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. These tools enabled the teachers to implement teaching activities for the required content, i.e., vocabulary, grammar and reading skills. Therefore, it can be concluded that the tests in the study encouraged the use of online tools for the teachers' better preparation of their students for the tests. However, this practice of application of trained teaching ideas and techniques into teaching did not positively promote EFL as a language for communication.

In terms of the teachers' choices of classroom organization, the teachers did not have the same practice. While Teachers 1 and 4 reported the use of default classroom arrangements, three teachers (Teachers 3, 5 and 6) claimed some occasional changes to the class arrangement. Evidence is shown in their interview extracts below.

... I sometimes asked students to arrange tables into U-shape for group work but not very often... (Teacher 3, Appendix 4.3)

... I often ask my students to move their desks and chairs to sit in pairs and groups to do exercises and peer-checking. Working together made them less sleepy in class... (Teacher 5, Appendix 4.5)

... I sometimes require students to arrange desks and chairs for pair and group work. Our school has "Schoolmates for mutual improvement" activity so they often sit with one another... (Teacher 6, Appendix 4.6)

It was noted from the findings that although the intensity of washback of the NHSGE English tests on this teaching aspect did not seem obvious, the teachers' minor changes in classroom setting to serve consolidation and practice activities implied negative washback direction.

As regards to the teachers' preference of instructional language, it was found that the teachers used more Vietnamese (L1) than English (L2) in their EFL classes. From the interviews, the teachers expressed that they did not decide to use L1 because of the students' English ability level. Their justifications for the practice included saving class time and students' better understanding of lessons which revolved the test task formats. The exacts below provided a good illustration of their viewpoint.

... My students can understand me when I give instructions in English but I speak Vietnamese to save time and help students understand lessons faster... (Teacher 4, Appendix 4.4)

... I use more Vietnamese for explaining the parts concerning word stress, grammatical points, and vocabulary. For some simple commands in class, I use English. I think what matters is that the students understand the lesson... (Teacher 1, Appendix 4.1)

There were only two teachers, Teachers 2 and 6, who claimed that they in fact used more L2 than L1 since in their class, they did not have to give a lot of instructions. In addition, because they only taught grammar, vocabulary, and reading, they believed what needed to be explained to students in English was "not difficult for their students to understand".

In short, the NHSGE English negatively influenced how the teachers taught English to 12th graders. The findings clearly showed that the teachers steered their choices of teaching methods and applications of new teaching ideas and techniques to suit test-like teaching content. The test washback on classroom arrangement and language instruction preferences was not as strong but inherent.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study has investigated the washback of the NHSGE English tests on EFL teaching of Vietnamese high school teachers. The finding of this case study with the participants of six EFL high schools showed negative washback of the tests on eight aspects of teaching. More specifically, the teachers entirely revolved their choices of teaching content, time allocation, and

provision of additional materials and in-class assessment tasks around the format and content of the NHSGE English tests. What they decided to teach then influenced how they taught although the intensity of washback negativity was not the same across the sub-aspects of teaching methods.

From the results of the study, it is advisable to make teachers and related stakeholders aware of various washback effects of high-stakes English tests in particular and high-stakes tests in general in the test-oriented educational settings like Vietnam. All the stakeholders need to perceive what factors trigger negative or positive washback effects and measures to promote as much positive washback as possible. The mechanism of high-stake test washback should also be made known to them for proposing effective measures to prevent detrimental washback in different educational bounded settings. In this study, a washback model and conceptual framework are introduced for investigating washback effects of high-stakes tests on EFL teachers suggested in some high schools which are geographically bounded. They, however, can be transferred to other research settings and used with other tests or with other participants. Additionally, the findings of this case study cannot be generalized for or completely applied to other cases, but they can serve as a baseline for washback effect studies at other research sites and with the involvement of other participants. The research is also hoped to motivate other researchers to conduct washback studies of other high-stakes tests in the NHSGE exam or similar high-stakes tests not only in Vietnamese high school settings but in the other educational levels.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Washback models suggested in previous studies

<https://shorturl.at/qtvCY>

Appendix 2. The themes of the questionnaire and follow-up interviews

<https://shorturl.at/FISX0>

Appendix 3. The questionnaire

<https://shorturl.at/koEKS>

Appendix 4. Interview transcripts (containing Appendices 4.1 to 4.6)

<https://shorturl.at/ouEIJ>